

## NON-FICTION

MAHMUD RAHMAN

Yet another Bond movie has come out, this time a remake of Casino Royale. Ian Fleming is long dead, but his creation, the debonair James Bond, Agent 007, keeps popping up in a new face. Bond's grip on the male psyche is tenacious. And why not? He zips to exotic locales and outwits vicious enemies while fingering cool gadgets and bedding impossibly hot women.

But Bangladeshi teenagers are not entirely deprived of heroes with cachet like Bond. In cheap newsprint, for a fraction of the price of a ticket at Basundhara where they screen Casino Royale, Bangla readers can enter the world of our very own super spy. In flesh and blood a pukka Bangali, he scales mountains, harpoons criminals undersea, and brings to justice crime lords from Hong Kong to New York.

He is of course Masud Rana, Agent MR-9. For forty years he has appeared in novels written by Qazi Anwar Husain and published by his Sheba Prokashoni. The crowds swarming the Sheba stall at the Ekushey Book Fair confirm that Masud Rana still has a loyal following.

Each Rana paperback opens with these lines: 'An untameable daredevil spy of Bangladesh Counter Intelligence. On secret missions he travels the globe. Varied is his life. Mysterious and strange are his movements. His heart, a beautiful mix of gentle and tough. Single. He attracts, but refuses to get snared. Wherever he encounters injustice, oppression, and wrong, he fights back. Every step he takes is shadowed by danger, fear, and the risk of death. Come, let us acquaint ourselves with this daring, always hip young man. In a flash, he will lift us out of the monotony of a mundane life to an awesome world of our dreams. You are invited. Thank you.'

With the books selling at 32-62 Takas, undoubtedly among the cheapest fiction titles in Bangladesh, Sheba is still churning them out. Their 2007 catalogue lists 372 Rana titles. You can buy used copies at 10-15 Takas at footpath booksellers from Paltan to Niltukh.

I discovered Masud Rana when I was fourteen. By then my classmates and I had devoured most of the Bond novels. We craved more of what Bond promised. One day a friend slipped me a Masud Rana. Once home, I read it cover-to-cover, going back to read some choice bits.

How did Rana appeal to me? Perhaps I

was secretly thrilled to share initials with Agent MR-9. Who knows, I might even have fancied myself as MR-10.

But there was a hitch. This was 1968, and back then, Rana worked for Pakistan Counter Intelligence. With the 6-point movement, I had become a Bangali nationalist and despised the Pakistani military. No doubt it helped that Rana mostly fought enemies abroad while his counterparts on the ground were scheming against our aspirations.

Rana had an edge over James Bond. Unlike Bond who seduced women in bikinis and skirts, Rana also disrobed women clad in sari, blouse, and chaya. Bond's women were exotic, but they didn't exist in my universe. For that matter, neither were any real-life sari-clad women within my reach, but teenage fantasies can't quite be explained by logic.

Soon came upheaval and such erotic visions had to take a back seat. I would be drawn to other kinds of books. And for decades, I didn't give a second thought to Masud Rana's fate. I even missed that in 1974, Dhaka released a Masud Rana film. The one and only, recently released on DVD by Laser Vision.

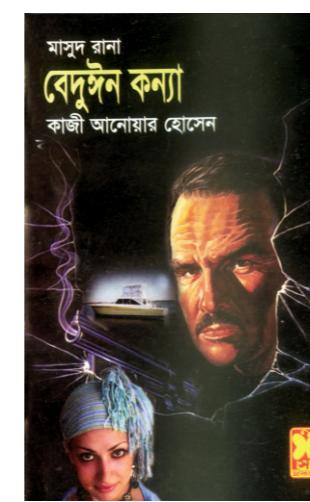
After years in the U.S., I'm home again, trudging the footpaths of Dhaka. One day on Mirpur Road, a lightning strike from the past jolts me. I come across a stack of Rana books. And I find that while many things have changed in Dhaka, Masud Rana remains in perfect health. Still fighting on. And while my hair's going grey, Rana has not aged a single year.

I pick up a few recent titles.

In the first, *Mrittuban* (Rana 359), the action is set in Bangkok, then Port Blair in the Andamans. Our hero saves India and China from being annihilated by Mr. X and his syndicate who have hijacked two nuclear bombs. This one reads like a traditional James Bond novel. It includes a woman named Trishna who's Mr. X's mistress but turns against him. Rana and Trishna

inevitably fall in love, and the book ends with both of them in hospital. Beyond 'the end' there may be the promise of sex, but the lovemaking described in the book doesn't go beyond kisses.

In the second, *Bedouin Konya* (Rana 371), the story begins in London, then moves to Cyprus and an island off the coast of Israel. Here the wicked adversary is the Mossad. Rana has been fighting Mossad on behalf of the Muslim world from the time he



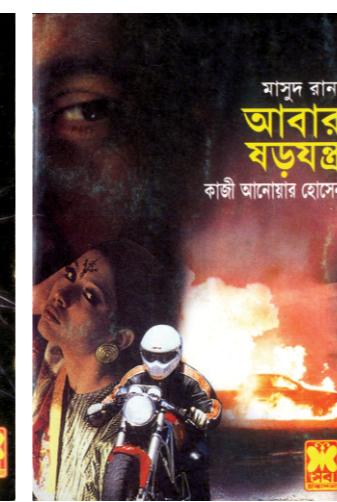
was with Pakistan CI. The 'Rana girl' in this novel is Suraiya who falls for Rana and then mysteriously disappears, emerging later in an unexpected twist. One time the two make love, but you get no juicy titbits.

I wonder if the lack of raciness in the writing reflects a more conservative mindset in the author. Of course I'm no longer fourteen, but I was ready to be taken back to that time. In these books, Rana somehow disappoints me. It's not so much that I miss him peeling off a beauty's sari, but despite forty years having gone by, Rana's world seems dated.

I think that what dismays me is that while Rana still flits around the globe, his own country is failing to pieces. Businessmen, politicians, and bureaucrats pile up empires of stolen wealth, godfathers terrorize villages and urban wards, yesterday's razakars sit in ministries, and Islamic terrorists set off bombs. I was eager to see Rana smoke out our own homegrown evil. Perhaps like others, Rana had to bide his time under the previous governments. Who knows, maybe now with a different regime in power, Rana will spearhead missions that will uncover something hotter than pilfered relief tin sheets.

That's my preference. Rana fans probably want him to take them to far-flung settings. The exotic has a strong hold on what we expect from our entertainment. But even so, there must be other readers like me who want to read of a tryst in a Dhaka hotel or a car chase through traffic jams between Karwan Bazaar and Uttara.

Then I crack open *Masud Rana No. 322, Abar Shorontro*, published in 2002. The



plot opens with Iti, the sister of a dead muktijoddha, meeting Rana in a secret rendezvous in a Shegun Bagicha restaurant. She sneaks in wearing a burqa. She tells Rana that the company she works for, run by a Maulana Keramatullah, is doing something shady. Keramatullah turns out to be a razakar who became a dacoit, made tons of money, and is now a respectable businessman. Under the cover of an Islamic political party, he's mobilizing the Khadem Bahini, an army of fanatics to restore Pakistan.

He teams up with Khairul Kabir, a scientist living abroad who has designed an electromagnetic pulse weapon. Masud Rana's job is to foil the plot and save Bangladesh.

Now this is a Rana that stirs me. Never mind that there's not even a hint of steam. There's politics, social commentary, suspense, and location. The story set entirely in Dhaka, there's a car chase between Lalmatia and Motijheel, a break-in at a Banani multi-storey complex, an abduction in Gulshan, and the finale is in a godown in Tongi.

Bravo, Qazi Anwar Husain! Masud Rana isn't as behind the times as I'd feared.

Unlike most Masud Rana titles and other books by Sheba Prokashoni, the copyright page of *Abar Shorontro* does not carry the standard line, *Bideshi kahinir obolombone*. Perhaps that means this one's a truly original story.

"This story follows a foreign plot" -- it's that disclaimer that makes many writers look down on the genre fiction published by Sheba. Besides *Masud Rana*, Sheba also publishes Westerns, suspense, horror, romance, and teenage adventures. They publish some abridged translations as well, but most of their titles would best be described as 'transplant fiction.'

Back in the 1960s I remember watching a Western film produced in Italy -- much later I came to know these were known as 'spaghetti westerns' -- and I kept thinking, I know this story, but from a different context. Then it hit me: the plot was based on *The Count of Monte Cristo*. To this day, Bollywood rolls out movies based on stories

from the Hollywood. Even an acclaimed movie like *Black* was based on a novel (and later an American film) about the Helen Keller story.

When I'm in a mood for light or timepass reading, I often choose genre fiction, mostly mysteries. Genre fiction seeks to entertain, and there's nothing shameful about that. Humans are hardwired to soak up drama. But even in that world, many writers aspire to something beyond fast-plot entertainment. Elmore Leonard is a master of dialogue. Walter Mosley's mysteries bring to life the story of the black community in post-WWII Los Angeles. Paco Ignacio Taibo II writes mysteries set in Mexico with a sarcastic voice relentlessly exposing corruption and social insanity.

As for borrowing from other writers, it too is often done. It's common in the world of theatre. Across languages and time,

Shakespeare, Moliere, and Brecht have repeatedly been adapted. Even literary writers pay homage to novels they admire. Only last year, Zadie Smith published the delightful novel *'On Beauty'*. She acknowledged that the novel followed the shape of Forster's *'Howard's End'*. But Zadie Smith's novel was not transplant fiction. You might say a hazy x-ray of the skeleton of Forster's novel was in the back of her mind when she wrote out the words in her literary creation.

Sheba Prokashoni's goal seems to be to provide affordable and entertaining books in Bangla. They have clearly played a role in encouraging young people to read. Their writers show skill. Now this is my personal bias: I feel that skilled writers should reach with their pens. Most writers find it hard to make a living through writing, and it's no crime against art to do certain kinds of writing for money. Many have written pulp fiction to pay bills while working on more serious writing. I hope that those who write transplant fiction for Sheba have, at some point in their writing lives, devoted themselves to some ambitious writing.

Still, many of those who write transplant fiction are not mere copiers. They don't just take a story from England or the U.S. and loosely translate it, merely changing place and character names. There is expertise involved in adaptation.

Besides Qazi Anwar Husain, Sheba seems to have a small army of adapters. I checked out a romance set in Mymensingh and a suspense set in north Bengal. Sheba's authors only 'follow' a foreign tale. They have to take that borrowed plot and filter it through their Bangali characters. When they

transplant the original character from say, London, to a place in Bangladesh, they have to do something quite different than an organ transplant. They have to make sure that the local characters sound believable as Bangali and they're not just English men and women with local names. The act of cultural translation can be tricky. Sometimes it works. When it doesn't, a foreign detail sneaks through and it jars. When there's politics and social complexities involved, they need special care. Dialogue needs reproducing in local flavour, the writer then creating unique idiolects. For example, *Masud Rana*'s old friend Gulyat Miah speaks with his own Kolkataiyan voice. Finally, while writing the book out, the author has to make sure that all elements come together with the final novel an integral whole, without limbs missing or sticking out.

That said, I would feel better if instead of just saying that this book follows a foreign tale, Sheba provided specific attribution. A writer somewhere worked hard to produce the original story, let that person get due credit. Thankfully, this tradition is strong in theatre.

Over the span of some forty years, Qazi Anwar Husain has written 371 Rana thrillers. Under his own name and the pen name Bidyut Mitra, he's also produced dozens of adventure books, self-help books, and the 25 *Kuwasha* titles that are now out of print.

Counting the *Masud Rana* series alone, that's a book every six weeks. All together, he must write a book every few weeks. Now that's quite a feat! For me, writing is hard work and it can take weeks, months, to hammer out a single short story.

So who's the real super hero here? *Masud Rana*, the super spy who's make-believe, or his creator, the super writer who's very much flesh and blood?

For me, there isn't much doubt.

Mahmud Rahman is an American-Bangladeshi writer currently on an extended visit to Dhaka.

## Masud Rana: Super Spy of Transplant Fiction

### Talking with Razia Khan: "Those who write well, do it instinctively."



Razia Khan is a Bangladeshi poet, novelist, critic, essayist and playwright who has been writing since the 1950s. She was a professor of English at Dhaka University, and generations of English literature students--some of whom went on to be teachers in the same department--have passed through her classes. Razia Khan showed promise at an early age, when she won the PEN Playwriting competition in 1956. Subsequently she won the Bangla Academy Award in 1975 and the Ekushey Padak in 1997. Razia Khan is widely known to readers as a poet and novelist in Bengali. Her notable works are *Bot-tolar Uporyas* (1959) *Anucalpa* (1959), *Proticita* (1975) *Citra-kabya* (1980), *Ha Mahajibhan* (1983), *Drupadi* (1992), *Padatik* (1996). She has written four volumes of Bengali poetry, as well as two English-language volumes, titled *'Argus Under Anesthesia'* (1976), and *'Cruel April'* (1977). While she has written poems in the original English, her English-language novels/works are translations, primarily by herself. Her English poems are highly allusive, in which an empathy for rural Bengal is discernable.

Here she exchanged a few thoughts with *The Daily Star*'s staff member Ahmed Hussain.

Ahmed Hussain (AH): You have started writing at an early age; what prompted you to write?

Razia Khan Amin (RKA): Inner image.

AH: You have not published a novel or a collection of poems for a long while, why is it so?

RKA: The first volume of my complete works came out in 1995 with six novels. I am not in touch with publishers.

AH: As one of the forerunners of English writing in Bangladesh will you share your observations of the country's current English writing scene with us?

RKA: Lita Samad, Rumana Siddique write well. I like the expository prose of Dr. Serajul Islam Chowdhury. Fakhrul Alam's English translations of Jibonananda are adroit. Freedom Fighter Habibul Alam's English book on the Liberation War have a racy, lucid style.

AH: We know that once people of this land fought valiantly to uphold their right to language, but at the same time, because most of the citizens do not know how to read and write Bengali as a language, it is fighting what many believe to be a losing battle. You write in both English and Bengali; how do you see the role of English in Bangladesh?

RKA: English will one day play a role similar to that in India. Once we overcome our complexes, we will give it its rightful place as an international language. Our battle with illiteracy is not lost, nor our effort to establish the value of the mother tongue.

AH: Are you working on a new project now?

RKA: I am shaping and giving last touches to the third segment of my trilogy. The first two have

### Beautiful Trivandrum

It is not even  
A year since I was  
Among your fiery flowers;  
Call them Gulmohars  
Flame-of-the-Forest,  
Or what you will.  
Day and night  
My dalliance  
With their falling petals  
Was laugher at  
By the more wise  
Who with grim faces  
Around the conference table sat  
While I played  
And gathered  
The blushing buds  
Of the Cadena-de-amora  
Truly known in distant Spain  
As chains of love.  
With these I wreathed my hair.  
The graceful, tapering leaves  
Of the lemon-scented ivy oleander  
I wore around my arm  
And thus beautiful Trivandrum  
Hidden in the deep South,  
Like myself, from the world's eyes  
Crowned me queen.

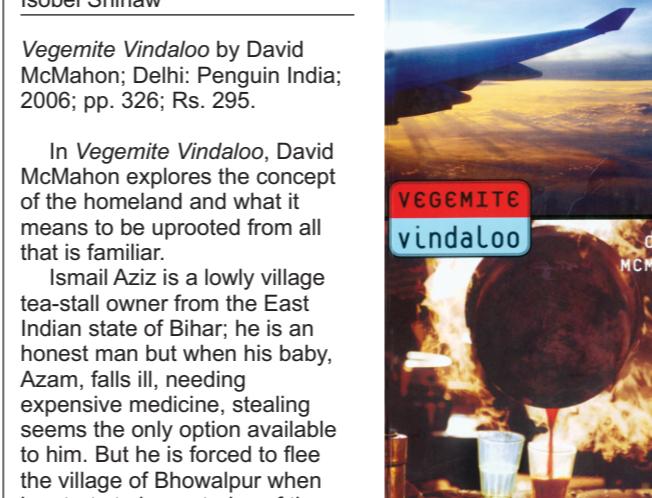


Ahmed Hussain's novella *Blues for Allah* was published in *Colloquy*, the Monash University literary journal.

*Drupadi*  
Originally, this novel was written in Bengali, and the English translation was done by the author herself. The novel's principal characters are students at Dhaka University, two men and a woman, and the novel covers the time period from '50s East Pakistan to December 1971, with the locales shifting to Calcutta and London during 1971. Though the book offers glimpses of a Dhaka now irretrievably lost--small, uncrowded, and gracious--the not-quite-lucid translation makes the

### Book Review

### Slack violin strings



starts discussing the lives of a parallel family, the Coopers -- wealthy Anglo-Indians who also live in Kolkata -- the writing becomes a little sloppy. A Kolkata-born Anglo-Indian himself, there is a sense that McMahon is instantly more

comfortable writing about his own social domain, and therefore doesn't feel the need to hold the language on such a tight rein. This is a shame, because the premise of the novel is interesting and the Indian segments are provocative.

Steve Cooper is an air pilot with no apparent personality; his wife Hilary, we are constantly reminded, is very pretty, but because her character is only very hazily sketched out, it is baffling to understand why, halfway through the novel, she changes from being a poisonous snob with racist tendencies into a loving, accepting, social visionary; there is no narratorial explanation for the transformation; it just conveniently holds the plot together. Likewise, after Zarina has been given a job as an ayah to the Coopers' son, Clive, all mention of Ismail evaporates despite the fact that the two families live under one roof. In

contrast, when it comes to the insignificant points, McMahon never tires of detail. We are even informed (for no discernible reason), of the speed at which a child drinks a glass of lime cordial; this is lazy, unimaginative story telling.

At the core of the novel is Steve's decision to adopt Azam Aziz and treat him as if he were his own son, in order to give him a better chance in life. The family behaves rather peculiarly -- at first treating their servants disgracefully, before taking pity and showering affection upon the baby (while continuing to treat his parents disgracefully) -- but the extraordinary part comes when they decide to emigrate to Australia, taking Azam with them, without initially consulting his parents. Oddly, none of the wider ethical arguments about removing a child from his parents to take him to a foreign country, or even the socio-historical reasons for treating servants in a different manner to

one's friends, are even raised, let alone explored. None of the characters is developed, and instead, McMahon drip-feeds us banal details and laborious, clichéd jokes. When the family finally reach Melbourne, one would be forgiven for thinking that they had been living on the moon all their lives, not contemporary Kolkata. Surely they would have heard of the concept of credit cards and ATM machines even if they had never seen them?

However, this is McMahon's first novel and certain passages in the earlier parts of the novel indicate that he has talent but the plot design and the language, like slack violin strings, need tightening before they will really sing.

Isobel Shirlaw lives in Dhaka and is a free-lance editor and reviewer.

### Kali O Kolom: Reinforcing a commitment to culture

SYED BADRUL AHSEN

*Kali O Kolom: Chothurto Protishtha Barshika Shongkha, Falgun 1413*

**T**here is much that will enthuse readers of this fourth anniversary issue of *Kali O Kolom*. For starters, there is the detailed write-up on the Iranian Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi. Operating under a regime repressive in certain ways, Ebadi's courage is what comes through in this article. And then, one moves on to the contents that have traditionally been symbolic of arts and culture in *Kali O Kolom* since it first